

US Labor Department reports 5,283 work-related deaths in 2023 as Trump prepares to slash safety oversight

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There were 5,283 workers killed on the job in 2023 in the US, a slight decline from the previous year. This devastating toll is the result of the capitalist system's willingness to sacrifice the lives of workers in the naked pursuit of profit—exemplified most graphically by the over one million lives lost needlessly in the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

According to the US Department of Labor news release last week, the two sectors with the most worker deaths were transportation and warehousing, with 930 fatalities, and construction, with 1,075 fatalities, the highest number of deaths in construction since 2011.

A grave warning must be issued: the incoming Trump administration can be expected to intensify the attack on workplace safety by cutting funding for regulatory agencies and further relaxing regulations to boost corporate profits at the expense of workers' health and lives. This is demonstrated by reports that Trump may appoint Heather MacDougall, a former Amazon executive, to head the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). Amazon is notorious for the high injury rates at its warehouses.

Further, Elon Musk, the leading figure in the Trump administration, the world's richest person and the owner of electric vehicle maker Tesla, stands to directly benefit from the relaxation of safety standards.

One major goal of the announced plans by the Trump administration to deport 11 million immigrants is to terrorize and silence immigrant and native-born workers alike from speaking out over workplace conditions. Added to this is the continual destruction of jobs which further intimidates workers.

The fact that the unions will do nothing to oppose plans by Musk and Trump to cut funding for safety programs and further gut safety regulations to boost corporate profits is shown by their praise for Trump's choice of Oregon Republican US Representative Lori Chavez-DeRemer as labor secretary. Teamster President Sean O'Brien has stated he's ready to work with Chavez-DeRemer and has posed for photos with Trump and his labor pick.

The actual scope of worker deaths is estimated to be much higher than the official DOL figures. According to the AFL-CIO's report *Death on the Job: The Toll of Neglect, 2024*, in 2022 there were an estimated 344 daily job-related deaths in the US. In

addition, there were an estimated 120,000 annual worker deaths due to occupational illnesses, as well as 3.5 million job-related injuries and illnesses that same year.

The AFL-CIO report further noted that funding for the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) remained stagnant under the Democratic Biden administration. The agency has only 1,875 inspectors to cover 11.5 million workplaces. The report also found that for 2022, "The average penalty for a serious violation was \$4,597 for federal OSHA."

The AFL-CIO report also detailed the increased use of child labor stating, "On Feb. 17, 2023, DOL announced it fined a contractor that had employed 31 children, ages 13 to 17, systematically across eight states to clean dangerous machinery in meat and poultry plants; some of the children reported suffering injuries." The report highlights the way the xenophobic anti-immigrant policies of the US government have made children vulnerable to the predation of corporations through the use of unscrupulous contract agencies.

In an earlier article the *World Socialist Web Site* drew attention to OSHA's delay in the release of the findings of its investigations into worker deaths at Amazon in New Jersey in 2022. The WSWs wrote that a "a Rutgers University and New Jersey Policy Perspective 2022 report found that Amazon workers suffered injuries at a rate 'almost twice as high as the injury rate among all other warehouse workers in 2021.'"

Immigrants and other vulnerable groups employed through contract labor firms at Amazon and other companies in the US and around the world are subjected to extreme exploitation. The use of outside contract labor essentially absolves large corporations of responsibility for safety and health violations, whose ultimate emotional and physical costs are entirely borne by the working class.

The auto industry exemplifies the way that the unions, in collaboration with corporate management, preside over conditions of grueling speedup and overwork that undermine health and safety. In addition, due to constant layoffs and job shifting, autoworkers are often shunted to jobs for which they have not received proper training.

One tragic example is the death of Antonio Gaston who died while working on the assembly line at the Stellantis Jeep plant in Toledo, Ohio in August this year. Gaston was a 53-year-old father

of four who was forced to move to the Toledo plant after Stellantis idled his plant in Belvidere, Illinois in 2023. He was pinned beneath the chassis of a vehicle while tightening bolts. While OSHA found the auto manufacturer in violation of safety standards, the result was a paltry \$16,101 fine, an amount likely to be reduced on appeal.

One Jeep worker speaking of the circumstances of the tragedy told the WSWs, “There is also immense pressure to eliminate down time and line stoppages, so people have to work faster to keep up. I’ve worked on that side before, and the jobs are extremely over-cycled.” He added, “The worker who was killed was in stock, and they have eliminated jobs in stock also. It’s a sad situation. He had a wife and children. Now they are without a husband and father. The company doesn’t care about safety, only cranking out numbers.”

Another autoworker, Tywaun Long, was 46 years old when he apparently suffered a heart attack and died while working at the Ford Dearborn Truck Assembly plant this past April.

The WSWs attended and reported on Tywaun’s funeral in Detroit, where close friend and coworker Alex Smith spoke about the uplifting qualities of Tywaun. “His laughter would fill the factory with love and joy,” Smith said, and “he would turn even the toughest days into good ones.”

The large turnout at the service was in part due to the realization by workers that the same conditions of speedup, dangerous overwork, and an unsafe environment in the auto industry they experience daily had contributed to Tywaun’s tragic and premature death.

“They have us on five days, 10 hours, and it’s hard to make doctor’s appointments and stuff like that,” a co-worker told the WSWs after the service ended. “Before we were working 10 hours, four days, and you had time to go to the doctors on Friday.

“But now with five days, 10 hours, it’s kind of hard to go to the doctor and keep yourself ready to go ... and to repair yourself. You have two days off to rest and that’s about it. If you want to go to the doctor, you have to request a day off. It’s very tough.”

Construction is another industry where workers face multiple hazards. Construction workers and other related trades are seeing a rise in silicosis, which is an irreversible scarring of the lungs caused by the inhalation of fine particles produced by work in construction, mining, and other industries, including the ongoing epidemic afflicting workers manufacturing stone countertops.

While there are safety measures that can mitigate the dangers, workers are still being disabled and their life expectancy shortened.

A CBS News report last February drew attention to immigrant and other countertop workers in California who were suffering from the effects of exposure to silica dust generated from the fabrication and installation of manufactured stone countertops, which contain 95 percent crystalline silica, much higher than the levels occurring in natural stone materials.

CBS reported that Dennys Williams, 36 years old, had to undergo a double lung transplant due to silica exposure from his work with engineered stone. His doctor informed him that even with the transplant he could only expect to live into his mid-forties. “You

live with the pain. It’s an inexplicable pain. I have pain every day. I wouldn’t wish this upon my worst enemy,” Dennys said.

In addition, workers and their families have been left exposed to chemical hazards on and off their jobs due to the failure of regulatory agencies to offer protection. This is exemplified by a recent investigative report from WBFO-FM concerning air pollution involving ortho-toluidine and diphenylamine.

Ortho-toluidine is a known carcinogen linked to bladder cancer that is being released from a Goodyear Tire chemical plant in New York state at what is considered to be significantly above the US EPA-determined acceptable levels. Subsequently, it was reported that the Goodyear chemical plant released air pollution for years over three square miles of an adjacent Niagara Falls, New York neighborhood at a level above seven times the state’s safety limit.

The WBFO-FM report drew attention to the high toxicity of ortho-toluidine and the fact that it is suspected to have driven cancer rates higher in Niagara Falls, stating, “Niagara County has the second-highest rate of bladder cancer in New York and ranks 21st nationally.”

A 2021 study it cites by researchers with the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), related to the Goodyear plant, confirms that ortho-toluidine exposure at even very low levels is a severe danger to health. The study determined, “Exposures as low as one part per billion—5,000 times lower than the federal workplace limit of five parts per million—created an unacceptably high risk of bladder cancer.”

The crisis of work-related deaths is international in scope. In the UK, Marek Marzec, a 48-year-old father and Polish immigrant who had only begun working with engineered stone in the London area in 2012 succumbed to silicosis this past November 30. He was diagnosed with the disease in April of this year and given weeks to live as he was too ill for a needed lung transplant.

Marek said in comments to *The Sun*, “It is time for urgent action to stop these dangerous working conditions I had to face before other stone workers contract this terrible disease and die.”

In summary, the defense of health and safety on the job cannot be left to corporations, pro-company unions or toothless government watchdogs. Workers need to take independent action by organizing rank-and-file committees, controlled by workers on the shop floor, to oversee working conditions and safety. These committees provide a means to link up workers in different industries and countries as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), which is committed to the struggle to replace the capitalist system that is the root cause of the intolerable pain and suffering, caused by the subordination of safety to the chase for private profit.

To learn more about forming a rank-and-file committee at your workplace please fill out the form below.



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